DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 431 205 CS 510 096

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TITLE W. E. B. Du Bois: A Dynamic Communicator and Cultural Iconoclast.

PUB DATE 1996-03-00

NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Joint Meeting of the Popular Culture Association and American Culture Association (Las Vegas, NV, March 25-28, 1996).

PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052) -- Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Biographies; *Black Achievement; *Cultural Context; Higher Education; Introductory Courses; *Mass Media; *Scholarship

IDENTIFIERS African Americans; Biodata; Black Writers; *Du Bois (W E B)

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a biographical sketch of the prolific African-American writer and sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois, designed as an instructional unit in an introduction to mass communication course which can help make students aware of the roles played by ethnic minorities in shaping American and world media. The paper provides numerous details of Du Bois' life and his experiences and of his outstanding work as a scholar, journalist, and creative writer. Contains 7 references. (NKA)

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ED 431 205

Popular Culture Association/
American Culture Association Conference
March 25-28, 1996
Las Vegas, Nevada

"W. E. B. Du Bois: A Dynamic Communicator and Cultural Iconoclast."

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It is important that introductory students of mass communication are aware of the roles played by ethnic minorities in shaping American and world media. Some earlier histories ignored the cultural contributions of women or people of color. The following biographical sketch of the prolific African American writer and sociologist Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois is designed as an instructional unit in my MCOM 1003/Introduction to Mass Communication course at Southern Arkansas University. It is not intended as an exhaustive profile of the man. Rather, it discusses his life and works in broad strokes. As a result, students gain perspective on DuBois and the challenges he faced concerning the role of African Americans in the early and mid-20th century.

The term "African-American" became prominent in the late 1980s, as many blacks sought to have their race identified by something other than the color of their skin. Had W. E. B. Du Bois still been alive at the time, he probably would have agreed with the name change. A man who was arguably one of the most prominent educators and writers of the American Negro experience in the 20th century, Du Bois wrote passionately about the plight of his people. He had published 1,975 scholarly articles, books, essays, poems, polemics, novels and plays by the time of his death in 1963 at the age of 95. Fiercely independent and

committed to the validity of his beliefs, Du Bois laid much of the groundwork for both scholarly investigation and critical analysis of Negro life in America. This paper will not only chronicle the life of Du Bois, but also detail how he became known as a leader of radical Negro thought during his lifetime.

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was born February 26, 1868 in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. His mother Mary raised "Willie", as his father Alfred left Great Barrington before he was born. Young Du Bois was different in the respect that he was half Negro, with the other half being French Huguenot and Dutch ancestry. While he had light skin and blue eyes, the community viewed him as a Negro. There were approximately 50 Negroes in Great Barrington, but its white residents displayed more prejudice towards Irish immigrants. Despite being raised in a one-parent household, Du Bois recalled his youth with great fondness in his biographies. He played freely with white boys as a child, attended an integrated Congregational Sunday school and worked at odd jobs to bring needed money into the household.

He was recognized as a student with great potential at Great Barrington High School. Principal Frank Hosmer thought Du Bois should enroll in courses that would better prepare him for college. Among the college preparatory courses Du Bois took were Latin, Greek, algebra and geometry. He graduated at the age of 16 from Great Barrington High School in 1884, and was the only

Negro in a senior class of 13. Du Bois delivered an oration at his graduation on the life and works of Wendell Phillips, a well-known abolitionist who had died earlier in the year.

Though Du Bois wanted to enter Harvard University upon graduation from high school, numerous factors rendered his wish impossible. Family and friends felt he was too young to enroll in college right away, believing it was in his best interest to work for a year instead. It had also been determined that the curriculum at his high school did not meet Harvard's entrance requirements. In addition to these setbacks, Mary Du Bois died in the fall of 1884 while William was employed as a timekeeper on a construction site in Great Barrington.

Money was collected from local churches and townspeople to allow Du Bois to attend college. They felt it was best for him to attend Fisk University, a Negro institution for freedmen in Nashville, Tennessee. Du Bois had no problems with this decision, as he had become increasingly curious about Negroes living in the region. He was enrolled at Fisk as a sophomore, and immediately earned a solid academic reputation. His liberal curriculum included courses in Greek, the classics, math and sciences. Ironically, the entire faculty at Fisk was white.

Moving to the South subjected Du Bois to racism and bigotry, both of which had largely been absent in his New England upbringing. He was still new to Nashville when he accidentally

ran into a white woman while walking down a street. The woman, who called him an "impudent nigger", interrupted Du Bois' polite apology. His outlook on race relations took shape here, as he witnessed segregation in all aspects of Southern life. Du Bois looked inward to his studies at Fisk with increased enthusiasm, and determined that his purpose in life was to fight the intolerance and bondage Negroes faced in America.

While his education at Fisk University was a turning point in his life, Du Bois yearned for a Harvard education. He wrote to the institution while still a student at Fisk. He expressed a wish to study there, but stated that he was a poor Negro in need of financial assistance. In the meantime, Du Bois graduated from Fisk University with a B.A. in 1888, delivering a speech at commencement on the German leader Otto von Bismarck. His three years at Fisk had been productive. He founded and edited the college newspaper, taught during the summers in East Tennessee, and left the institution with an awareness of how he wanted to serve his race.

Harvard University accepted Du Bois for admission as a junior in the fall of 1888, awarding him a Price Greenleaf grant. His undergraduate courses included chemistry, geology, social science and philosophy. One of his favorite professors, William James, taught him "realistic pragmatism." Du Bois graduated cum laude in 1890, receiving a B.A. in philosophy. Once again

selected as a commencement speaker, his topic was Jefferson Davis, former president of the Confederate States of America. Du Bois was applauded in local press accounts for his conciliatory tone regarding Davis.

While Du Bois enjoyed his studies at Harvard, he assiduously avoided contact with white students. He viewed most of them as prejudiced towards Negro, Jewish and Irish students on the campus. Northern whites ignored him, and Southern whites would not seat themselves near him in the classroom. As a result, he did not solicit interaction with them, instead accepting voluntary racial segregation. This willful social isolation led some students to believe Du Bois was arrogant and aloof, charges that were only partially true. He did enjoy the company of others, but most of his acquaintances were black.

His studies at Harvard continued at the graduate level. In 1891, he received an M.A. in history. Du Bois had always planned on earning a doctorate, but he believed he should take courses for it initially at a German research university. He applied to the Slater Fund, and received $750 for travel and study overseas. He began two years of doctoral study at the University of Berlin in 1892. One of Du Bois' professors there, Gustav Schmoller, was influential in persuading him to become a scholar. It was also at the University of Berlin where he became interested in the socialist movement and the teachings of Karl Marx. Du Bois

applied Marxist theories of socialism to the struggle for racial equality in the United States. He enjoyed his years in Europe, as he was treated with respect and encountered little bigotry there.

Returning to America in 1894, Du Bois immediately began a search for a teaching position at a Negro university. He was offered positions at Wilberforce University, Lincoln Institute and Tuskegee Institute. He accepted the offer from Wilberforce to teach Latin and Greek, even though he had not been trained as a teacher in those areas. The institution was conservative, and run by the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Du Bois was stymied as he attempted to introduce educational innovations into the curriculum, such as the study of sociology. He decided to leave Wilberforce in 1896 when he was asked by the University of Pennsylvania to study Negroes in Philadelphia. In 1895, he had received a Ph.D. in history from Harvard University. The title of his dissertation was Suppression of the African Slave Trade in the United States.

Du Bois, along with his new wife Nina, lived in a one-room Philadelphia apartment for one year as he interviewed more than 5,000 Negroes living in urban tenements. His findings were published as The Philadelphia Negro, where one of his conclusions was that some social problems faced by blacks could be improved by self-help. This sociological effort, widely praised at the

time, helped him to land a position at Atlanta University in 1897. He would teach, start a sociology department and conduct conferences that investigated the American Negro lifestyle.

Wanting to establish a name for himself in literature, Du Bois published extensively in addition to teaching at Atlanta University. His 1903 book, The Souls of Black Folk, is his most widely read work. A series of essays, its theme is one that criticizes appeasement to whites by Negro leaders such as Booker T. Washington. It helped to establish the idea of Du Bois as a radical leader, as his style of writing had changed from a restrained tone in The Philadelphia Negro.

His busy schedule also included coordinating yearly conferences studying Negroes, known as the Atlanta University Studies. In charge of the event from 1896 until 1914, Du Bois included educational topics such as "The Negro Common School," "The College Bred Negro American" and "The Common School and the Negro American." He also stated that a "talented tenth" of American Negroes should be college-educated to serve as role models and cultural leaders. Du Bois did not view this concept as elitist. It was branded as such by supporters of Booker T. Washington, who instead favored an industrial-based education for Negroes.

While early communications between Du Bois and Washington were cordial, their relationship soon changed. The arrest of a

man heckling Washington at a 1905 Boston meeting angered Du Bois. The Niagara Movement was soon formed to address Negro equality, even though its goals were criticized by Washington supporters. As Executive Secretary, Du Bois was responsible for editing organizational publications called Moon and Horizon, both of which met with little success. When the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was formed in 1910, Du Bois was offered a position as its Director of Publications and Research. He accepted, in part because he felt his controversial reputation bothered Edmund Ware, the new president of Atlanta University.

Du Bois began his new career at age 42 as editor of The Crisis, the monthly magazine of the NAACP. Its circulation had grown from 1,000 in 1910 to more than 100,000 by 1918. Even though Du Bois worked for the NAACP, the magazine represented his personal beliefs rather than those officially held by the organization. The NAACP tried on numerous occasions to check his independence, but was unsuccessful. During his tenure at The Crisis, Du Bois spoke out on Negro rights throughout the world, organizing many international Pan-African Congresses. Among other activities, he advocated Negro participation in World War I and criticized Marcus Garvey's concept of relocating Negroes to Africa.

By 1934, the infighting between Du Bois and the NAACP

leadership had reached the breaking point. He advocated a temporary acceptance of segregation, which was strenuously opposed by board members. It soon became clear that years of independence without accountability for his actions had come to an end. A majority of the board had also turned down his request for more decision-making authority by members of the organization. Du Bois, now without a base of power from which to work, resigned from both the NAACP and The Crisis.

He was asked to return to Atlanta University, where he accepted a position in the sociology department. Du Bois, once again an academician, soon published two major works. Black Reconstruction in America marked his return to scholarly research. It chronicled how white historians had ignored substantial contributions made by Southern Negroes to governments during Reconstruction. His third autobiography, Dusk of Dawn, recounts his life as a Negro activist, writer and historian. In addition to writing books, he created and published Phylon, an Atlanta University magazine.

Forced to retire without notice from Atlanta University in 1944 at age 76, Du Bois had to alter his life once again. The reasons for his dismissal are unknown. At the time, he had been discussing the possibility of instituting black studies programs at black land-grant colleges in the South. Even though Du Bois was soon offered positions at other black institutions, he

returned to the NAACP. He remained with the organization until 1948, when he was fired for publicly supporting Henry Wallace, the Progressive presidential candidate.

The final 15 years of Du Bois' life were marked by controversy, more publications and personal acclaim. He unsuccessfully ran for a New York senate seat in 1950 as the candidate of the American Labor Party. His wife of 53 years, Nina, died earlier in the year. Du Bois married civil rights activist Shirley Graham in 1951. The Justice Department had indicted him a week prior to his second marriage for failing to register as a foreign agent for the Peace Information Center. He and four defendants were later acquitted when the government could not prove its case.

Du Bois primarily wrote for leftist publications in the 1950s. One of his writings from this period, "I Won't Vote," criticized President Dwight Eisenhower and Governor Adlai Stevenson for not taking strong stands on civil rights in the 1956 presidential campaign. Another publication from this era was "Colonialism and the Russian Revolution." Du Bois claimed there was no proof that the Soviet Union had used force to perpetuate its aims. During a 1959 visit to that nation, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev awarded Du Bois the Lenin Peace Prize.

In 1961, Du Bois became a member of the Communist party of the United States. He had advocated socialism for many years,

but now believed that Communism was the only way in which democracy could be restored to American Negroes. He also accepted an offer from President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana to compile an Encyclopedia Africana. Du Bois became a citizen of the African nation in 1963, spending the final days of his life researching and writing information reports concerning the project.

Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois died August 27, 1963 in Accra, Ghana. The next day, more than 500,000 blacks marched for civil rights in Washington, D.C., an event which culminated with the Martin Luther King "I Have a Dream" speech. Du Bois' impact upon Negro education, media, literature and empowerment today is testament to the intellect and foresight of the man. While many may disagree with his personal political beliefs, his place in history as a leader of his race cannot be denied.

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